

SYNERGY:

Knowing me – knowing me. Changing the story around ‘behaviours of concern’. Promoting self-awareness, self-control and a positive narrative

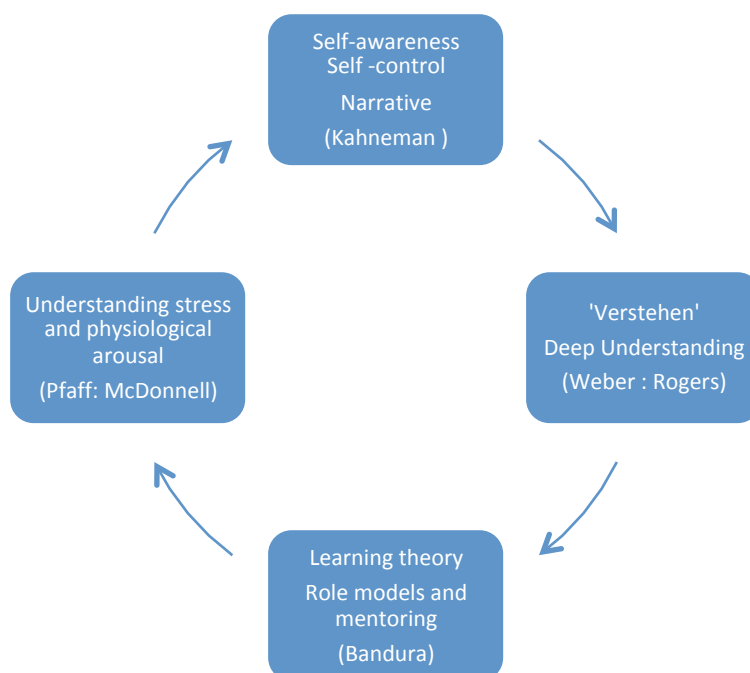
Richard Mills and Michael McCreadie: June 2018

Abstract

This article builds on a blog for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in April 2018 and a longer article in the Learning Disability Today in 2017. It describes an approach (Synergy) to working with individuals who are at risk by reason of ‘behaviours of concern’. Developed by AT-Autism and the Laskaridis Foundation, Piraeus, Greece, Synergy was a response to a need for Greek schools to be more inclusive of children displaying ‘challenging behaviours’. Our initial work was at a time when Greek schools were facing new and additional difficulties in accepting refugee children and teachers faced personal and professional hardships related to austerity. The approach therefore needed to be values-led and sensitive to local circumstances, culture and resources. It was also important to build local capacity that would enable schools to help children with increasingly complex and diverse needs, rather than rely on external ‘experts’. Training therefore needed to be practical, clear and thorough to aid fidelity but short and able to work within tight financial and other constraints.

Overview

This brief overview and discussion of Synergy attempts to show how a short, intensive practical course focused on mind sets and behaviours of workers supported by mentors can be used to promote a well-being culture and a changed narrative across a range of services for people who may be at risk. Synergy launched in 2014 and has now been accredited by the CPD programme. Training comprises one one-day practice and one one-day mentor workshops and the model is sustained through local mentors - in turn supported by the team from AT-Autism UK.



Approach

The approach comprises the following interlinking elements:

- 1. Self-awareness and self-control: The instinctive brain v the thinking brain. The importance of narrative**
- 2. Verstehen: Deep understanding**
- 3. Learning theory: Role Models and mentoring**
- 4. Understanding stress and physiological arousal**

These are underpinned by evidenced practice derived from established psychological and physiological theory.

1. Self-awareness and self-control: The instinctive v the thinking brain and the importance of narrative

Most approaches in this field tend to focus on techniques that will attempt to change the behaviour of children and adults displaying ‘behaviours of concern’. We do not believe this is enough. Even where people have been extensively trained in such techniques problems persist - or in some instances are made worse. The behaviour of staff or the narrative is seldom considered, unless as part of an enquiry into the abuse of vulnerable individuals.

Some years ago we met Jamie. Jamie was autistic and attended a residential school. There were concerns about Jamie’s behaviour with several staff clearly terrified of him, avoiding interaction with him if possible. Yet others were not afraid of Jamie and clearly enjoyed his company- as he did theirs. With them he was not a terrifying presence but one of good humour and fun. He was interesting. Yet the blame was laid at Jamie’s door; his ‘behaviour’ had been identified as the problem. He was the one that needed to be ‘changed’. Why was the same child perceived so differently by the two groups of staff? Our intervention therefore became less about changing Jamie and more about supporting and changing the understanding and mind-sets of the people working with him – and with that their behaviour and the narrative that was becoming increasingly damaging and unhelpful. But it was more than a better awareness and understanding by the staff of Jamie. It was also about a better awareness and understanding of themselves. Developing and sustaining practical strategies to recognise and manage this.

Workers in education and human services frequently encounter situations which produce high levels of stress. This may involve crises and behaviours that create fear or concern. The reasons for this are often complex and difficult for us to comprehend. They invariably relate to factors, which are for the most part beyond our control. However, *our* beliefs and behaviour and *our* mind-sets, *are* within our control and it is on these aspects that we focus.

Our natural response to dealing with a crisis, trauma or stressful event is immediate and instinctive. It can best be summarised as ‘flight or fight’. In this state our bodies are flooded with hormones that affect our thinking and the way we behave. Our mind is highly alert and reacts immediately and instinctively. This is a perfectly natural reaction to our perception of danger. We are programmed to behave this way. But although natural and important for survival, this reaction is also prone to errors of judgement that can have undesirable or disastrous consequences.

Examples of this might include the fairly innocuous, such as the panic experience of losing one's house keys or phone or diary or more serious events such as 'road rage' or our response to a real or perceived physical attack such as terrorism. Our reactions extend beyond the immediate scenario to how we perceive wider aspects. Our experience will affect our perceptions of future scenarios or our opinions of people or groups of people or events. It is how we categorise these in our minds for future reference. It is unconscious and insidious. It is how mistakes are made. It is how stigma, prejudice and harmful narratives develop and bad judgements occur. It is therefore problematic. Specific training is needed to recognise and deal with it.

We now know that this natural reaction is influenced by personal and cultural factors which combine with our conscious and unconscious biases. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes this instinctive process of believing and behaving as the 'experiencing self' or 'system 1' (Kahneman, 2011). 'System 1' is instant, reflexive and lazy. It is related to 'flight or fight' and to our unconscious belief systems and biases. In human services it also dictates the narrative.

Kahneman also describes a calmer, more reflective mental state where our response and the pros and cons of a scenario are carefully evaluated. This will lead to judgments and behaviour that are more rational and deliberate. Here we become aware of and in control of our own thoughts and importantly, our beliefs and behaviour. Biases are challenged and discarded and a more authentic story is developed. Calmness prevails. Kahneman describes this as the thinking self – or 'System 2'. This is important in our lives and work but it requires effort and does not come naturally.

Being in touch with one's own emotions in this way helps prevent harmful stress. The task therefore is to help people to *have a plan* to 'switch' from 'experiencing and reacting' (with biased perceptions often heightened by stress) to 'thinking and responding' – in short from 'System 1' to 'System 2'.

This requires training and practice in an approach that is not dissimilar to that designed for the airline industry. Preparation and planning are vital, every eventuality is anticipated but recognised for what it is and free of bias. Dangers and hazards are not over or under estimated. Painstaking rehearsal of responses (*having a plan*) will help ensure an alert and calm mind with control over one's own actions at all times. It is about flicking an imaginary switch from 'experiencing self' to 'thinking self'.

A practical illustration of this concerns this example of 'road rage.' We gave the following scenario to a group of teachers. We asked what they made of it and what they would do.

Scenario

You are driving home. A car horn startles you and you become aware of a car very close behind you repeatedly flashing its lights. A glance in the rear view mirror shows that car is being driven by young male wearing sunglasses, a reversed baseball cap and who is speaking on his mobile phone. He is dangerously close.

Without special training our interpretation is instinctive - and will determine our response. First we may be startled. This produces a physiological reaction, which causes us to go into 'flight or fight' mode as stress hormones flood in and rapid changes occur in our body. Based on the opinion and experience of young males (narrative) we apply biases, which may interpret his behaviour as aggressive. All of this is instantaneous. It causes us to 'fight' – by cursing him or other means – or (less frequently) by 'flight' – in this case avoidance.

Interestingly, we found most reacted with hostility to this scenario – the ‘fight’ response. The ‘narrative’ portrayed the driver and his behaviour as aggressive. Most felt alarmed and upset by it. This was confirmed by the biases associated with their view of young males, baseball caps and sunglasses. That he was also using his mobile phone (interpreted as arrogance and carelessness) served to confirm this narrative which depicted his behaviour as arrogant and aggressive.

Hostile terms were used by the group to describe what they thought of this driver and what they would do. Their responses varied; ‘I would give him the finger’, ‘I would brake hard so he had to swerve to avoid me’, ‘I would pretend to brake by pressing the brake pedal to p*ss him off’. All were examples of ‘experiencing self’ or ‘System 1’ response.

We then gave **additional information**. This concerned what they were *unable* to see.

The young man’s partner is on the back seat of the car in child birth. She is haemorrhaging. He is speaking to the doctor who has told him to get her to hospital within the next ten minutes otherwise he might lose her and the baby.

We asked if this changed things. They felt it did. Importantly this new information had challenged and caused them to question their biases. It opened up the possibility of a different narrative where the ‘madman’ became a devoted husband and father-to-be. He was now the victim where **they** were in the wrong by obstructing him.

This deeper understanding – of how we begin to see the world from the viewpoint of the other is referred to by sociologist Max Weber as *verstehen* – (deep understanding from the position of the other). It is often missing from a simplistic or reductionist analysis that consists only of *what we can see*. Problems will be further compounded by our conscious and unconscious biases, the prevailing narrative - and stress. As such, a deeper understanding is often difficult. Can we understand that which we cannot see - or even know exists? Especially at times we are highly stressed?

We invited the teachers to consider a future where *regardless of what other drivers might do*; they would *have a plan* to ensure they remained in control of themselves. They would be *calm and in control*, even if another driver *was* aggressive or arrogant or careless - and even if they were afraid. They would always *have a plan* based on being in control of their own emotions and beliefs and behaviour. They would *have a plan* that would remind them of unseen and unknown factors such as what might be ‘on the back seat of the car’. In other words they would switch to the ‘thinking self’ or ‘System 2’ where they were always in control of their own behaviours and responses. As such, the approach would become a habit for life rather than a technique just to be used when at work.

On follow-up feedback was interesting. All reported a positive change in their coping ability and stress levels. One teacher told us that ‘thinking things through’ in this way and *having a plan* helped her to remain calm and in control in other areas of her life and that she was also less irritated by her partner’s annoying habits!

‘System 1’ and ‘System 2’ or the ‘experiencing self’ and ‘thinking self’, do not just apply to crises. Our values and behaviour and the narrative around people are heavily influenced by our instincts and the roles that we occupy. These in turn link to our biases and the way we interpret the world. How we are perceived and how we perceive others. It is how we organise our thinking to make life more predictable. It is how self-evident ‘facts’ are generated. It is how we think about others and develop ‘them and us’ schemas. It is how stigmatised or marginalised groups are ‘othered’. ‘We’ are not like ‘them’. ‘Othering’ also applies to children and adults with disabilities or the cognitive differences as

may be seen in autism or cognitive impairments such as those found in people with dementia. It can also apply to marginalised groups such as refugees or homeless people.

Harsh, brutal or repressive regimes such as those found in some schools, care homes or prisons - or even kindly but patronising attitudes that restrict autonomy or human rights are all indicators of 'othering' caused by the integration of biases into belief systems and language. Despite a move to more so called 'personalised' approaches the instinctive (experiencing self 'System 1') tendency is for the label to obscure the person and for us to judge and collude with a prevailing stereotype or narrative. This in turn results in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that may be depersonalising or stigmatising. Even where this is well-intentioned it can produce or reinforce a damaging narrative.

Reacting instinctively (the experiencing self - 'System 1') to people described as exhibiting 'challenging behaviour' typically blames and stigmatises those individuals. It produces fearful or aggressive reactions and a narrative of fear where the person is vilified. Lower standards or expectations follow, where neglect or abuse is tolerated or permissible. Unwittingly, many so called 'person-centred' approaches would seem to focus squarely on the behaviour of the individual and ignore our own thoughts beliefs and behaviour.

Alternatively, by getting to know ourselves and our own belief systems, biases, perceptions and reactions better will help us gain control of ourselves and to develop self-awareness. This in turn will help us to understand and build a relationship with 'the person as a person'. Being accepting and kind and building an alternative story around them is an example of switching to the 'thinking self' or 'System 2'. This offers protection on a number of levels to 'support-adults' (e.g. teachers, parents staff) and to the person receiving support. It is broadly in two parts.

Firstly, our 'thinking state' is mindful and watchful. It is alert to the dangers of how we are affected by our conscious and unconscious biases, our altered physiology and our psychological responses to stress. We work to gain and remain in control of ourselves; to be self-aware, calm, kind, respectful - and rational. This demands training and practice but over time becomes a way of life – not just role or work - related behaviour. There are exercises to promote and develop this and mentoring helps to support.

Secondly, our responses are planned, thorough and thought through. They might be positive such as insisting on a kind, respectful, inclusive outlook and behaviour from everyone in the team toward the person. Or they might be negative as in *preventing* harmful practice, for example zero tolerance of unkind, disrespectful or neglectful behaviour or lower standards. It is also about not allowing inexperienced or ill-equipped colleagues to take on tasks beyond them.

We plan and prepare. We rehearse. We think. We are imaginative and curious but always in control of ourselves and alert to factors that could drag us unwittingly into 'System 1'. We always *have a plan*.

2. Verstehen: Deep understanding

Sociologist Max Weber described *verstehen* as a means of deep understanding that encapsulated a multitude of factors, not least the experience of the other. The scientific practice of testing only that which can be defined in scientific terms is disputed. There is great overlap with learning theory and the work of psychologist Albert Bandura. In this way simplistic explanations of human behaviour such as crude behaviourist or the medical model are questioned. Human behaviour is multifaceted and as we have demonstrated, based as much on the unseen, such as culture, thoughts, feelings and beliefs, as it is on what is observable. An autistic child experiencing sensory overwhelm in a shopping mall is

likely to be labelled as ‘naughty’ and his parents as ‘neglectful’ by those unable to empathise with his sensory overwhelm. Once they are understood - a more positive and helpful narrative can develop.

Putting oneself in the shoes of the other - taking an inside-out perspective demands that we really know ourselves and listen attentively to the other. By standing back and being in touch with our own mind-set and in control of our responses we can begin to learn to listen and understand the world of the other person.

Taking the time to do this also addresses one of the main areas of concern in this field; conveniently labelling those behaviours we do not understand as ‘psychotic’, ‘autistic’ or ‘complex’ - or medicating or restraining people on the basis of institutional, cultural norms or personal biases.

Giving advice is easy – listening is hard. Psychologist Carl Rogers suggests that when faced with a problem, especially a crisis, it is usually easier and quicker to produce a ready-made solution than it is to listen (Rogers, 1959). But by failing to listen we not only risk disempowering others, we also unwittingly disconnect them from their system of self-support that enables them to think through and create their own solutions. If we continually tell our colleagues what to do we interfere with the self-reflection that is critical to developing self-sustaining strategies and their ability to cope. We undermine well-being and resilience. We promote dependency. We regard this as an important ethical issue.

Of course, people will often ask what they should do – or demand advice based on ‘do this’ or ‘do that’. This is easier to deliver and requires little thinking about, but in practice is invariably little more than a re-hashing of selective memories of past incidents and our accompanying biases. Moreover, many of these memories may, as a result of selective bias, also turn out to be false with ‘successes’ exaggerated and difficulties minimised. ‘What has changed?’ ‘What is it about him you find endearing?’ ‘What will make this child happy?’ ‘How is his health?’ ‘What have you tried?’ ‘Has this always been so?’ may be better responses than ‘I once knew a child that did that – you should do this’. This will help the switch from ‘System 1’ to ‘System 2’.

As has been argued earlier, the development of a narrative around groups and individuals is highly significant in both practice and policy. Similarly a focus on particular aspects of the person such as a specific behaviour or their diagnosis or past history or reputation colludes with our biases and the available narrative. This may be further compounded where the person is defined by where they live such as a ‘specialised unit’ or the professionals who support them e.g. ‘the behaviour team’. This will invite judgement of that person and may produce a damaging perception of that person by others but also by themselves as they internalise this. Alongside this may come a description of the person as ‘wilful’ or ‘dangerous’ and with that a narrative of risk and dangerousness with policies and procedures to boot. Thereafter everything about the person is viewed through this lens.

Research has shown that merely labelling a person as A or B will determine the ongoing narrative, the nature of any ‘treatment’ and the outcome. Wolf Wolfensberger’s essays on the importance of valued social roles for people at risk of stigmatisation remain relevant, particularly when people may have more than one label attached to them (Wolfensberger, 1983). In 1974, Rosenhan found that simply labelling a sane person ‘mentally ill’ in a psychiatric hospital caused all of their behaviour to be viewed through the lens of mental illness. A diagnosis of autism or description of a person as ‘challenging’ risks the attribution of a host of so-called characteristics that lead to unhelpful attitudes and ways of behaving toward that person.

3. Learning theory - Role models and mentoring

An approach that sees guided exploration through active listening and sensitive probing or ‘Socratic’ questioning, offers ownership of solutions to problems. One where the worker develops self-awareness and a coping strategy based on a deeper understanding of their own biases, strengths, weaknesses and capacity. Where they learn to manage these along with any personal stress, rather than merely perform a set of pre-determined instructions, such as part of a ‘behaviour plan’. Such an approach will naturally include the person receiving support. Simply instructing staff on what to do will not produce good outcomes for themselves or the people they support. Leadership is therefore about reinforcing good behaviours, attitudes and narratives through modelling them at all times.

Bandura emphasises the importance of role models – how we learn from being around others- and from observing and internalising - rather than being under explicit instruction. There are many examples from human services of the effect of role models. Modelling those behaviours and attitudes we value and wish to encourage is incredibly powerful and if managed correctly a force for good.

Partly for these reasons we believe that the practice of teachers (and others) receiving intensive training in the Synergy approach, supported by experienced mentors can offer a way forward.

4. Understanding stress and physiological arousal

Worker stress as a response to workplace events is not unique to human services. (McDonnell et al 2015). Other occupations face this but may be better at managing it. To refer again to the airline industry, pilots encounter high levels of stress on a daily basis. They must be very highly trained in everything that can happen on a flight so that in the event of an emergency there is a consistency of approach based on the best evidence of how to respond. It is not left to chance. It requires painstaking recruitment of would-be pilots, intensive preparation, training and rehearsal and evidence of competence before being passed fit to fly. Additionally, attention is paid to issues related to mental and physical well-being and lifestyle, including rest and relaxation, workload and coping, and the physical environment. It also depends on the support of a whole team where everyone is trained on how to behave consistently and rehearses this on every flight.

Contrast this with what we often find in human services, where recruitment, training, support and well-being are often afforded lower priority and resources. Where teams are generally poorly trained and a great deal is left to chance. Unlike the airline industry, workers in human services are routinely exposed to highly stressful situations that are beyond their level of competence and experience. It is common practice to find the least experienced and least competent workers dealing with the most complex and stressful situations.

We have found that human services and their workers are often operating in ‘experiencing self’ ‘System1’ mode where for at least part of their time they are physiologically and psychologically unfit. This is likely to be compounded by stress and a variety of personal, institutional and cultural factors that are in turn influenced by conscious and unconscious biases. These factors combine to produce the harmful behaviour and narratives evidenced by the numerous and repeated scandals involving human services over many years.

Workers in services for people labelled as ‘challenging’ are likely to experience high levels of residual and crisis-driven stress. We suggest that developing greater self-awareness and rehearsal of a plan that involves being prepared mentally and emotionally will reduce stress and avoid

confrontation. This offers protection to the worker and the person using the service - a plan that switches the worker from 'System 1' to 'System 2'.

What can be done?

Even if it was desirable, effective intervention that changes the behaviour of another human being is elusive. This is evident from the host of unsuccessful approaches and continuing need for so-called 'specialised services'. Changing the behaviour of another human being by 'doing things to them' is incredibly difficult. On the other hand, an understanding of one's own beliefs, behaviour and coping skills through guided self-reflection and self-awareness is achievable. It is more likely to result in a better and healthier relationship for the worker and for the person receiving support. In this, an understanding of the impact of the psychological and physiological factors at work is critical and will enable a more effective and healthier mind-set and outcome.

It may be that some schools and human services are already doing this but we have found few. Workers in these services need support and effective leadership to change their behaviour and the narrative around the people they serve. We have argued that change and self-efficacy is more likely to be influenced by role models – for good and ill (Bandura, op cit). We have seen examples of this from scandals, of how easily neglect or brutality is copied and becomes part of the institutional culture. But Jean Vanier showed that it is also possible to influence culture by modelling acceptance, tolerance, kindness and thoughtfulness and found that worker well-being improved under these conditions (Vanier, 2013).

Demonstrating humane and mindful practice whilst remaining calm, listening and gently questioning are key leadership attributes and should be high on the 'essential list' for anyone fulfilling such a role in human services. With its focus on the mind-set of the worker and not the behaviour of the person receiving support we believe the Synergy approach offers a promising way forward and the potential to transform practice. Just as airlines require you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others, the Synergy approach seeks to reduce stress and develop self-awareness, capacity and resilience in the worker as a means of helping others.

The Synergy programme comprises one one-day practice workshop and one one-day course for people who complete the practice workshop and wish to train as mentors. Optional seminars are available on related topics together with ongoing support from the Synergy network.

We continue to do our best and develop Synergy alongside our colleagues, mindful of *our* need to reflect and to be vigilant in the light of experiences and our own biases – both conscious and unconscious. We sincerely thank our colleagues from the Laskaridis Foundation, Piraeus Greece for their ongoing inspiration, ideas and support.

“Men are disturbed not by things but by their opinions about them”

Epictetus

For more information on the Synergy programme contact the authors; richardmills@atautism.org or michaelmccreadie@atautism.org or info@atautism.org

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